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Ghana needs you... dead not alive

By Kwaku Sakyi-Addo

BBC News, Accra

Funerals are big in Ghana and Ghanaians love their fancy coffins. But what's a funeral without a corpse?

That's a question Ghanaians are grappling with after the Ghana Medical School announced it was short of corpses at the start of the academic year.

The school wants people to donate their bodies for research instead of having them buried right away after elaborate funeral ceremonies.



Ghanaians like to be buried in colourful coffins

"We use these bodies to teach anatomy - the study of the structure and function of the human body," says Professor Aaron Lawson, head of the school's department of anatomy.

"A person studying to become a doctor needs to know where various parts of the body are and the inter-relationships among various organs and tissues. So we use dead embalmed bodies."

Laid in state

The school usually relies on the morgue to give them unclaimed bodies for their research.

But with an increased intake of students this year, Prof Lawson says the morgue is not able to

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cope with their demand.

He admits, however, that it is going to be difficult to convince Ghanaians to give up their bodies to research.

"We as Africans tend to love funerals very much. So instead of offering the body to science, we would like it to be laid in state."

This is the problem for the medical school as it wants the cadaver to be delivered within 24 hours after death.

Finger nails

That is difficult in a society in which funerals are bigger events than wedding ceremonies and funeral rites are extremely important.

"If you don't perform those rites properly, the passage to the ancestors or heaven becomes a little difficult for your soul," says Professor Dartey Kumodzi, an expert in Ghanaian customs and African traditional religions.

He says donation is not out of the question but should be discussed with family and clan heads before hand so that they can ensure certain body parts are used in the ceremony.

"The finger nails and hair in particular need to be taken for the burial ceremonies," Prof Kumodzi says.

"If they don't do this, the soul hovers around and becomes a ghost because it's not accepted by the ancestors."

The age of the deceased is no barrier for donation, as long as he or she signed up for it between the ages of 21 and 75.

Generation gap

But is every body welcomed by the Ghana Medical School?



“ If you don't perform those rites properly, the passage to the ancestors becomes a little difficult ”

Prof Dartey Kumodzi



Ghana's fantasy coffins

"If someone dies from an infectious disease like tuberculosis, we do not accept it," Prof Lawson explains, "because we wouldn't want that a communicable disease to contaminate other bodies."

So how are ordinary Ghanaians responding to the demand?

One 28-year-old man I spoke to on the streets of the capital, Accra, seemed keen.

“ I want to have a permanent resting place. Then my relatives can visit my tomb from time to time ”
Sixty nine-year-old man

"Why not? In Africa we do too much about the dead - bearing in mind that somebody dies and is kept in a freezer for a month. So if the bodies can be used for useful causes like this, why not?" he said.

"Once you're dead, you're dead."

But the idea is not appealing to all.

"I wouldn't do it for any reason," a 69-year-old man said.

"I want to have a permanent resting place. Then my relatives can visit my tomb from time to time."

If these opinions are any indication, then it seems the young might be more ready for post-mortem adventure than the old.

Would you or have you signed up to donate your body for research or do you consider it taboo? Should science be given more sway in this day and age or should local customs be respected? Let us know your views using the form below.

Your comments:

I agree with Mr Johnson. When you're dead, you're dead. Giving up your body for science is a great idea. Besides we're running out of space for cemeteries.

Christine, Gaborone, Botswana

Virtual cadavers are widely used nowadays in Medical Schools. If the Ghanaian Medical School is not already doing that, then that is something to think about. Studying anatomy on stinky preserved samples has gone the way of the slide rule. In formaldehyde preserved cadavers, the colour, texture and shape of organs change from what students encounter on live patients. The virtual cadaver (which was made by scanning and digitizing thin slices of a

frozen human body) is, therefore, a better and a lower cost alternative to cadavers which have to be preserved, handled and disposed of ultimately.

Rakesh Chaubey, Dallas, USA

I believe that people would be more willing to donate their bodies for research if they are made to appreciate what the work of the researcher is all about by way of information/education. Most people would not offer their bodies or those of their relatives because they don't even know why. Custom is like rock but the wind of information/education can turn it into sand.

Edmund Gabriel Sam, Accra, Ghana

Adjoa Ocran has a good point saying Ghanaians (especially Asante and Brong) spend too much on funerals. This is an indirect result of ignorant Ghanaians in the diaspora who make relatives preserve dead loved ones until they have returned for the funeral. If Ghanaians are to even consider donating their bodies to research, the diaspora needs to play its role as well and stop wasting money on dead people and start looking after those alive. And if medical research can add to the latter, then they should support that.

Akua Ampofoaa, Amsterdam, Holland

That's a very interesting topic I came across. I wouldn't mind signing for it, provided that it is for a better cause. But as an African, I should see to it that certain norms, customs and values are followed. That's negotiate it with people concerned i.e. my family and relatives who might feel offended by my skeletons being kept somewhere after I have died long ago. But anyway, is there any benefits involved such as payment to my family?

Simon Naukala, Windhoek, Namibia

Ghanaians spend too much on Funerals, especially the Ashanti Community. Giving out our bodies to the medical schools can help promote better learning environment for future doctors. After all, it is the soul that matters and since they cannot do anything to the soul, why should one bother to spend so much on a body that will rot and be consumed by termites. With the current socioeconomic hardships in the country, one needs to save cost. Funerals are formalities but not necessities.

Nana Adjoa Ocran, Ghana

I think is necessary for people to sign up for their bodies for research purposes. This indeed will make studying easier, increase number of prospective students willing to undertake medical studies and help combat many illnesses. For people to come forth, I think there has to be more understanding on all parties involved, given the

fact that African cultures vary and have many customs to observe. I personally wouldn't mind signing up of course if clear customs are respected and followed. BD

Bhekani Donga, New Zealand

It's a great idea for people to donate their bodies for the reason the professor gave but as far as Ghanaians are concerned and the level of importance they attached to funerals, it will need a lot of education. Like what someone said "WHAT WILL BE A FUNERAL LIKE WITHOUT THE CORPSE". But I wonder whether the professor that spoke will donate his body in case of the inevitable. I wish him good luck.

EKOW ANAMAN, ACCRA/GHANA

When you're dead you're dead. I find it amazing in this day and age that people should still believe in "heaven" and invisible "gods", and ghosts and other such nonsense.

Alastair Johnson, London, UK

Gone are the days when custom was custom and somehow it worked for our people. However in this era of technological advancement with its accompanying modern illness such as cancer and Aids that is killing our society, it makes sense if we can incorporate traditions or customs with science or medicine... I will willingly donate my dead body if it will benefit the medical school but on condition that probably my hair or nails are given back to my family for a very simple burial because I am part of a society, I don't live in isolation and need to be accepted and known as coming from that family, clan or custom.

ESTHER, Canning Town, London

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